

## Microsoft V. Microsoft – the battle for your desktop

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Microsoft unveiled the latest release of their iconic desktop operating system, Windows Vista, at the end of November 2006. They also released Office 2007 on the same day, giving us updates to Word, Outlook, Excel, PowerPoint and a host of other products. As with most dramatic births, the event was met with plenty of oohs and ahhs, and more than a little relief from a number of product managers in Seattle. The announcement shook countless computer nerds from their gaming to swarm onto the internet so that they could buy the latest and greatest, but what of the commercial world ?

For most of IT managers, the event would have registered as interesting, but not something to consider before the first service packs became available to fix the correctly anticipated bugs in these new products (service packs have now been released for Windows Vista and Office 2007). Having upgraded as early as February of last year in order to gain some experience of the new systems, I can endorse their caution. My Sony Vaio went from being a responsive, number-crunching, word-processing bundle of joy to a sluggish, unwilling Kevin-the-teenager of a laptop. It has only been with the application of innumerable fixes since then that my machine has returned to its happy self.

I have to say that my initial impressions were distinctly average. The Windows Vista operating system, the bit that allows applications (like Outlook) to talk to the hardware (like my laptop), isn't really something that most users will build a deep and meaningful relationship with, and Word's new user interface (using 'ribbons' of graphical icons) is so different from the old menus that I found myself harking back to the good old days... of 2003. However, with time and a little understanding, I came to find that the new interface was easier to work with, and more genuinely helpful than past attempts (like the unbelievably irritating paper clip – Bill had a lot to answer for with that one!).

I am now at the stage where I find working with older versions of Word and Outlook annoying at best. And yet, and yet... I still wouldn't automatically advocate an upgrade now that the service packs are available and the systems are starting to run smoothly. Windows XP in combination with Office 2003 is a well known, well understood, and widely supported environment. No-one is going to lose their job because they selected this winning combination in the last year or so, even with an end to mainstream support looming in 2009. Microsoft's extended support will ensure that security patches continue to be provided free (alongside paid-for support where necessary) until 2014.

However, this is only part of the story. Whilst Microsoft might support their environments for a good number of years, will your key application vendors do the same ? If your document or practice management system stops working and the vendor is no longer providing fixes for the version of Office you are using, you may be heading down a bit of a dead end. And this is pretty much the situation facing users of Windows and Office 2000 – whilst Microsoft's extended support runs until 2010, the latest releases of some key applications in the legal sector no longer operate on this platform.

Whether they want to or not, sites running Windows and Office 2000 (or older - yes, they are still out there) really need to be upgrading. For these sites, Windows Vista and Office 2007 should be a reasonably straight forward decision, albeit one that should be accompanied by a due diligence exercise to ensure that older applications are able to run on the new platform (ever get the feeling you were between a rock and a hard place). Those with the hardest decision are the sites on XP and 2003 – should they stay or should they go ?

For my perspective, I wouldn't change unless there was a real need. Your lawyers won't share your enthusiasm for the pretty graphics in Vista if an upgrade makes them less effective while they struggle with unfamiliar features that deliver no obvious benefit. However, there are points where you might well consider an upgrade is worth contemplating, such as a firm-wide replacement of the desktop hardware – why visit every desktop twice in 12 or 18 months when you could do it just the once ?

So what is there to look at here – what are the main points to consider with Windows Vista and Office 2007 ? I have included a brief overview of both products – this is not an exhaustive list, and neither is it deeply technical. Rather, it reflects a practical product analysis phase we recently undertook as part of a desktop refresh programme.

### **Windows Vista**

- Vista won't have a huge impact on the average user and certainly not lawyers at their desks, but it does provide improved multi-media access (such as support for Blu-Ray DVDs, which may cheer your firm's hotel bound lawyers).
- Advances in Windows' security should help your IT department to reduce the risk of attack or virus infection, especially for firms using laptops extensively.
- Vista comes with a new user interface called Aero – this provides beautiful graphics, but won't really deliver much for organisations where the main focus is on generating documents and emails.
- Improvements to the management tools available for Windows is likely to help your IT department with the administration of users' desktops and laptops, which may be seen as a genuine benefit.
- Microsoft have included several more technical advances with Vista, but it is unlikely that many of these will have a discernible impact on the day to day working of the firm's lawyers and secretaries.

### **Office 2007**

- Market analysts indicate a low commercial take-up for the latest Office offering at this point in time, which seems to be borne out by the low adoption within the legal sector. I expect adoption rates to speed up this year though, not least because of the lack of support for Windows and Office 2000 in newer versions of key applications.
- By contrast, the domestic market (driven primarily by new hardware sales) appears to be adopting Office 2007 more quickly – the same seems to be broadly true of Vista. This is not a trivial point, as it will reduce the impact of significant changes to Office's user interface – see below.
- Microsoft continues to develop its application strategy towards a collaborative environment hosted by their SharePoint platform (which many firms are considering as a platform for their intranets or for wider collaboration) and, as such, has tightly integrated Office 2007 with MOSS or SharePoint 2007 making it easy to publish directly from Word to SharePoint.
- Information Rights Management (based on the Digital Rights Management software that the music industry spawned and, more recently, spurned) is enhanced. Whilst this is unlikely to feature widely in the legal sector just yet, it may become increasingly attractive as organisations key into the fact that it gives each document the ability to carry its own access controls, i.e. portable security outside of your network and its document management system.
- Office 2007 introduces a dramatically different new user interface called Fluent, which is often referred to as the ribbon. This is a major departure from the existing menu-based system to the extent that long standing users may find it hard to adapt at first, although I would expect new users find it more intuitive than a menu-based approach. However, and as noted above, I would expect the pain of this transition to reduce as the number of domestic users rises.
- Word introduces greater compare functionality and introduces a meta-stripping tool for the first time. Both of these bear more than a passing likeness to the Workshare products in this space, and will undoubtedly put the company under pressure as vendors like Open Text look to hook into the new functionality to increase the value of their own products.
- Microsoft has developed an alternative format to PDF called XPF, although I don't anticipate this taking off just now most especially as they provide a PDF creation tool as a free add-on for Office.
- Whilst the user interface is the most obvious change here, it is the new XML format for documents (DOCX), presentations (PPTX) and spreadsheets (XLSX) that is likely to have the greatest impact. This should improve Word's document resilience (which has often been at its most flaky between different releases), and make it easier to fix documents. It will also reduce the space typically taken by documents to as little as a quarter or a third of the old DOC format. However, firms will need to be careful with their

timing here, as many organisations are still unable to work with the new formats at this point even though an XML-format reader is available for earlier releases of Office.

- The XML format draws Office 2007 closer to the web-based technologies that are proliferating just now, and should help third party developers as they strive to automate various elements within it. For Word and DOCX specifically, this should help to improve document automation and the re-use of information held in documents.

So there you have it - the battle is actually a balance. The balance between stable, known, trusted desktop software and the need to maintain support, to adopt new functionality, to appear current without taking the risks associated with leading edge. And you thought this IT stuff was easy!